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## Political Ecology II: Whither the state?

Alex Loftus,  
Department of Geography,  
King's College London

### Abstract

However conceptualised, the institutions and relations associated with the state are clearly crucial to political ecological research. Environmental policies are enacted through state institutions, and property rights over land and resources are enforced by the legal framework and monopoly power associated with the state form. Nevertheless, political ecologists have sometimes had an uneasy relationship with conceptualisations of the state, leading to recurring questions over the adequacy of political ecological theorisations. Over the last decade and a half such questions have led to a call for dialogues with political geography and, more recently, with critical geopolitics. In this second progress report, I review recent political ecological theorisations of the state, pointing to a set of shared concerns associated with the processes, relations and struggles through which states are brought into being and acquire certain effects. I will conclude with a note of caution when it comes to an uncritical dialogue with more abstract interpretations of state power.

**Keywords:** political ecology, state theory, geopolitical ecology, social contract

A recurring question for political ecologists concerns the degree to which they take the state seriously. While some of the path-breaking works within the field afford the state a central role in environmental decision-making, how this role has materialised and how state power functions is not always clear. Incisive contributions from Robbins (2003; 2008), Whitehead et al (2007), Harris (2012), Meehan (2014) and others break new ground within political ecological theorisations of the state. In so doing, these contributions draw on a growing, and increasingly rich, body of scholarship. Nevertheless, lingering questions remain: these have become more pressing in recent years with a number of calls for dialogue with both political geography (Robbins 2003; 2008; Benjaminson et al 2017; Harris 2017) and critical geopolitics (Bigger and Neimark 2017). This dialogue is necessary, so the argument goes, because of the ongoing inadequacies of political ecology when it comes to questions of policy and when it comes to interpretations of the instruments of the state. Robbins (2003; 2008) has been quick to make the parallel argument that political geography would benefit in significant ways from such a dialogue<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Although such claims can easily be abused these calls for dialogue can partly be traced to two vibrant “schools” of political geography/ecology in Ohio/Arizona/Wisconsin (developing alongside Paul Robbins and Sallie Marston) and Minnesota/UCLA (associated with Eric Shepherd, Helga Leitner, Bruce Braun and John Agnew).

In this second progress report, I will attempt to draw together some of the different “states” of political ecological research. Rather than arguing that the sub-discipline lacks an adequate theorisation of the state, I will suggest that many political ecologists have engaged in considerable depth with state theory. However the results of those engagements often pull in very different directions. If, as Bryant (2015: 16) argues, political ecology exhibits an “anarchic splendour” in the diversity of its approaches, this splendour is more evident than ever when it comes to the question of the state. In reviewing such a range of perspectives, I will also strike a note of caution, calling for a critical dialogue with more macro-level perspectives within critical geopolitics that may not always be best suited to the demands of political ecological research.

### **Previous states of political ecology**

Making a case for the importance of state-environment relations is not difficult. With most environmental regulation being traced back to the state, and with the relations embodied within the state appearing central to a variety of environmental conflicts, it seems crucial to take this ‘actor’, this ‘scale’, this ‘relation’ or this ‘institutional form’ seriously. Nevertheless, as Morgan Robertson (2015) notes, political ecology has often seemed ambivalent about the state: such ambivalence can in part be traced to the political ecology’s Sauerian roots. Thus,

the tension between the site-focused analysis of material cultural ecology on the one hand, and acknowledgement of the site’s connections to increasingly global scales of economic and political organisation on the other, has kept political ecology circling state theory and political geography but rarely fully engaging with it.

Contextualising prior conceptualisations within the development of the sub-field permits Robertson (*ibid.*) to develop a deeper understanding of how tools deployed at different moments appear less or more able to deal with the question of the state. These tools are summarised in Paul Robbins’ (2008) “postcard from the field” to political geography. For Robbins, political ecologists have sought to capture how the state: is a territorial strategy of simplification and abstraction (in the vein of James Scott’s (1998) *Seeing Like a State*); is an actor within global political economy – or the final link in chain of explanation analyses; and how the state is a knowledge system, capable of prioritising certain ways of knowing over others. Showing how each of these larger categories provides the basis for work on a range of different sub-themes, Robbins then points to the multiple contradictions within each. Thus, as territorial strategies of simplification, states can also develop policies to promote biodiversity conservation; states can be viewed as powerful actors and yet that power can be understood to be waning; and the state can appear both a container of expert knowledges and a ‘leaky vessel’. Developing a deeper conversation with political geography provides an opportunity for negotiating these contradictory perspectives and for sharpening the tools through which political ecologists might seek to conceptualise the state

In his references to the ‘chain of explanation’ approach that characterised political ecology in its infancy, Robbins picks up on a theme explored in greater depth within Robertson’s

(2015) account of the previous states of the sub-discipline. Having noted political ecology's roots in Sauerian cultural ecology and within in-depth anthropological understandings of the site and situation, Robertson notes the apparent irrelevance of the state to such a unit of analysis. He then positions Nietschmann's paradigm-shifting study of Miskito subsistence as one attempt to grapple with the growing significance of political economy in a framework that was no longer adequate to the task: this inadequacy in part lies in the absence of a theorisation of the state. In addition, Robertson notes a shift in first generation political ecological works. Thus, Blaikie's (1985) explicit acceptance of Ralph Miliband's theorisation of the state can be seen as an attempt to address this lacuna. Subsequently, Blaikie and Brookfield's (1987) *Land Degradation and Society* appears to position the state as an autonomous actor within the chain of explanation favoured by the first generation of political ecology: "the state and the world economy constitute the last links in the chain" (Blaikie and Brookfield 1987: 27).

By seeking to counteract the sub-disciplinary focus on the local with a more explicit focus on power relations that manifest at a range of different scales Bryant and Bailey's (1996) *Third World Political Ecology* appears to move in a fundamentally different direction for Robertson. Nevertheless, the authors' focus on the state as a relatively autonomous actor within the politicised environment can also be seen as a continuation of some of the earlier concerns. The authors' recognition of the paradox of the state within capitalist modernity, serving as both developer and protector of environmental resources, begins to point to a far more complex understanding of the state as the embodiment of contradictory relations and interests.

### **De-thingifying states**

While both Robbins (2008) and Robertson (2015) refer back to political ecology's contested histories in order to periodise the previous states of political ecology, Meehan and Molden (2015) frame political ecology as "a community of practice, 'something people do' rather than a coherent theory or body of knowledge" (2015: 441). This catholic approach to political ecological traditions inevitably crosses over with political geography. Within this community, postcards from the field would not be from actors working in particular sub-fields but would be among joint practitioners and addressed to shared concerns. In so doing Meehan and Molden (*ibid.*), advocate for an understanding of the state not as a thing but as "a resonance chamber". This resonance chamber simultaneously "enables the calculus and legibility of nature for capital" while material practices and objects produce state subjects who simultaneously subvert their subjection.

If the approach to political ecology differs slightly from Robbins' (2008), several of the concerns are clearly the same. Notable is the desire to challenge fetishisations of the state. Far from actors within a politicized environment or the final link in a chain of explanation, states are not things at all. This de-fetishising approach is characteristic of recent work in which states are read as: socio-natural effects (Harris 2012); crystallised forms of contested socio-ecological processes (Angel and Loftus 2017); and the effects of embodied political ecological practices (Meehan 2014). Each of these understandings would appear to refer back, to a greater or lesser extent, to Timothy Mitchell's (1991) work on the "state

effect” and Philip Abrams’ (1977 [1988]: 58) claim that “The state is not the reality which stands behind the mask of political practice. It is itself the mask which prevents our seeing political practice as it is.” Joe Painter’s (2006) work on prosaic geographies of stateness provides a further inspiration. Building on the work of Bakhtin and Tolstoy, Painter claims that “the *effectivity* of the mundane and the ordinary encourage us to rethink both the functioning of state institutions and the mechanisms that give rise to state effects” (*ibid*: 761, emphasis in original). While the affinities with Foucauldian governmentality approaches – that might emphasise the particular rationalities and conduct through which government is conducted, be it in the form of changing conservation practices (Agrawal 2005) or through climate change mitigation and adaptation policies which government is conducted (Luke 2011) – are clear, Painter is careful to draw some distinctions:

“Governmentality draws attention to the construction of the objects of government, and to the logics, rationalities and technologies of rule, whereas prosaics highlights the unsystematic, the indeterminate and the unintended. On the other hand, the two perspectives do converge in their focus on mundane practices and the productive nature of discourse.” (Painter 2006: 763)

Within political ecology, Foucauldian approaches linking political ecological knowledges to the practices of statecraft can be traced at least as far back as Peet and Watts (1996) *Liberation Ecologies* and continues in work on neoliberal environmentality (Fletcher 2010) on “aleatory political ecology” (Clarke-Sather 2017) and in notions of the Green Panopticon (as used for the title of a series of sessions, organised by Rob Fletcher and José Cortes-Vazquez, at the 2018 POLLEN conference in Oslo). Whether drawing from Mitchell, Abrams, Marx, Bakhtin or Foucault, the challenge for political ecologists who seek to defetishise political ecological practices is to look behind the mask of the state and see struggles over land and resources for what they are. Water infrastructure can thereby be seen to consolidate a particular state effect, further reifying state-society boundaries (Harris 2012). Both official and ordinary infrastructures can be understood as cementing and disrupting the state effect (Meehan 2014). Moreover socio-ecological struggles can come to be embodied and expressed in the state form (Angel and Loftus 2017).

## **Relational states**

If Mitchell and Abrams have been key sources for de-fetishising approaches to the state, historical materialist accounts of the state have also been highly influential. One of the key reference points for historical materialist accounts is usually the debate between Ralph Miliband and Nicos Poulantzas, which played out in the pages of *New Left Review*. Although the debate is easily caricatured, Poulantzas was said to adopt a more structuralist approach to the state – in which the personnel occupying positions of power were seen as effects rather than cause of the capitalist nature of the state – whereas Miliband was seen to adopt a more instrumentalist perspective, placing emphasis on how the class position of state personnel invest the capitalist state with distinctive (capitalist) characteristics. Beneath the apparently contrasting perspectives, nevertheless, there is agreement that the state is best conceived relationally. Thus, Miliband (1969: 46) writes that “the state is not a thing...it does not, as such, exist. What ‘the state’ stands for is a number of particular institutions

which, together, constitute its reality, and which interact as parts of what may be called the state system" (*ibid*: 46). Quoting this section from Miliband, Harvey (1976) goes on to write that: "Strictly speaking, Miliband is incorrect in this designation. The State should in fact be viewed, like capital, as a relation (Ollman, 1971, chapter 30) or as a process – in this case a process of exercising power via certain institutional arrangements". The similarities with work that later – drawing from Mitchell and not from Marx – came to focus on "state effects" are clear and this 1976 essay serves as an important and neglected resource for political ecologists. Reading the state "as a process of exercising power via certain institutional arrangements" appears to capture precisely both the "territorial strategies of simplification" and the wielding of expert knowledge referred to by Robbins (2008). Nevertheless, it would be wrong to collapse crucial differences between approaches that: tease out the narration of the state through discursive and material practices (Harris 2012); focus more centrally on the objects, infrastructures and resources through which state effects are produced (Meehan 2014); and that emphasise political ecological struggle as crucial to the state form (Angel and Loftus 2017).

Whether or not such different approaches can be integrated into a coherent theoretical framework is an open question, although few have done so much to integrate and synthesize approaches to state theory as Bob Jessop (2007) who develops a Strategic-Relational Approach to state power. Beginning from the foundational claim that the state is a relation, Jessop develops conversations with a range of different theorists, most significantly with Antonio Gramsci, Nicos Poulantzas and Michel Foucault. Within political ecology, Jessop's work has been adopted within: the conversation Ioris (2012) seeks between Strategic Relational Approaches and Urban Political Ecology; within work on the political ecology of water privatization (Bakker 2003); literature on neoliberal natures (McCarthy and Prudham (2004); and within work on the relationship between uneven development and low carbon restructuring (While et al 2009). Most notably, Jessop's conceptual foundations are crucial in one of the few book length treatments of the state, Whitehead et al's (2007) *The Nature of the State*. Dismissing fetishistic approaches to 'the state' and 'nature', the authors seek to grapple with internally related but differentiated sets of socio-ecological processes. The theorisation of the state that results therefore brings together a diverse range of thinkers, including not only Jessop but also Bruno Latour and Michel Callon. By exploring state natures in a range of different sites, Whitehead et al are thereby able to "excavate the political ecologies of the modern state" through a careful synthesis of empirical and theoretical work. Jessop himself also appears to retain an interest in political ecological questions. Most recently, this interest has found expression in a paper (drawing from a lecture delivered 10 years earlier) that rectifies Nicos Poulantzas' own apparent neglect of political ecological concerns through the bold claim that "without a proper engagement with political ecology, we cannot consolidate Poulantzas's lessons about political economy and the democratic transition to a democratic socialism" (2017: 188).

Parenti (2015) has a slightly different take on the relational state, arguing that "the environment making state" supports the property regimes, the physical infrastructures and the scientific knowledge through which use values can be "delivered to" the accumulation process. Building on Jason Moore's approach to capitalism as world ecology, Parenti argues

that “the state does not have a relationship with nature, it is a relationship with nature”. In one important and memorable phrase, Parenti then goes on to claim that “the ultimate ‘landlord’ is the state”, linking the environment-making state to the capture of rents. Often allied to analyses of financialisation, political ecologists have turned in increasing detail to the study of rent extraction in relation to environmental resources (Huber 2018; Felli 2014; Andreucci et al 2017), sometimes building on earlier analyses of the formation of rents within environmental politics and policies (Vlachou 2002). Elsewhere, popular texts such as Mariana Mazzucato’s *The Value of Everything*, provide a particular insightful analysis of marginalist economists’ conflation of value creation with rent extraction, thereby occluding a deeper analysis of what is and is not productive within global and national economies. Rent is best understood as a social relation enabled by a system of private property rights that is expressed in the form of a thing (a transfer of money for access to that land, resource or asset). State (relations) play absolutely fundamental roles in sustaining the private property relations through which such rents or super-profits are enabled. States are simultaneously the providers of infrastructure through which further rents can be extracted and, following processes of privatisation, from which rents can be extracted directly.

The relationship between rentierism and the state is given much greater empirical and theoretical depth in research still emerging from the work of CENEDET in Ecuador. Purcell et al (2016, 2017) have therefore explored the ways in which the Ecuadorian state’s self-proclaimed efforts to diversify its economy away from primary resource extraction have ultimately been skewed by the ongoing need to capture rents from those resources. Thus, an understanding of “the rentier state” begins to emerge that more clearly positions state economic and environmental policy in relation to both processes of capital accumulation and rent extraction. Nevertheless, unlike this more nuanced empirical research Parenti’s personification of the state as “landlord” or “environment-making” appears to belie an implicit contradiction with the relational approach developed elsewhere. Is it possible for the state to be both an environment-making thing and a relationship with nature? Can the state be both actor (landlord) and relation, both thing and non-thing?

### **Within and against the state**

In a slightly different iteration of the claim that political ecology lacks an adequate conceptualisation of the state, Parenti (2015: 829-30) sets up his approach by bemoaning the lack of engagement with the state in the otherwise flourishing set of historical materialist approaches to political ecology. The blame for this lack of engagement is partly levelled at the “infantile communism” he perceives in the work of John Holloway and others who – in Parenti’s view – naively wish away the state. This is clearly a risk in defetishising approaches in which by dethingifying the state, perhaps also state power is seen to be less material. However, Holloway’s work is far richer than the crude caricature allows and has proven deeply influential within environmental work on autonomous geographies (Pickerill and Chatterton 2006; Chatterton and Pickerill 2009), within a range of debates over “the commons” that crossover with political ecological concerns (Chatterton 2010), as well as within work on politics “at a distance from the state”. What serves as the lightning rod for criticism is Holloway’s claim that the aim of anti-capitalist struggle should be to

“change the world without taking power”. Such an argument is frequently taken as a foil through which to advocate for a relational approach that takes state power more seriously than naïve infantile communists. Thus, Routledge et al (2018) adopt an approach to sustainable and just transitions drawing on Erik Olin Wright’s theory of the state “*contra* John Holloway”. Their understanding – read through social movements – of how climate justice might be realized “through and against the state” bears some similarity with the approach taken by Angel (2017). Nevertheless, Angel’s reading of Holloway is profoundly different from Routledge et al (2018), in part owing to a careful tracing of the roots to the Holloway’s state theory. These roots – and their transformation into an activist platform through the London Edinburgh Weekend Return Group – become crucial resources for Angel (2017) as well as for Angel and Loftus (2017). For the latter, a workable conceptualisation of state-society relations that might deal with the ambivalent relationship described by Robertson (2015), requires interpreting the socio-ecological struggles that come to be embodied and expressed in the state form.

Angel and Loftus’ (2017) argument focuses on the manner in which rights-based struggles – for them, the struggle for the right to water – might have the paradoxical result of empowering the very institutions from which forms of water injustice emerge. The question becomes how to take a defetishising approach to the state when it comes to actual struggles in which the state is implicated. The iconic case here is South Africa, in which the post-apartheid government served as a pioneer in granting citizens a right to water and yet in many instances has also acted swiftly and harshly to punish those unable to pay for water.

### **State, Citizen and the Social Contract**

South Africa continues to provide particularly fertile ground for the development of political ecological research, no less so when it comes to questions of the political ecology of the state. Rodina and Harris (2016) therefore look at how narratives of state and society come to be established through the provision of water. Elsewhere, Rodina (2017) has applied a lived-experience perspective to her understanding of the right to water in Khayelitsha. In so doing some of the claims made by the post-apartheid government are shown to be deeply questionable. Thus, once again, the value of the kind of grounded empirical approach for which political ecology has come to be known are shown to undermine certain narratives of the state, as well as narratives perpetuated by the state. Each of these approaches therefore builds on a relational understanding of the state while also taking seriously the state effects or the power relations, the real-world outcomes, such as access to water, that emerge from the state as a socio-natural relation. In a multi-authored paper to which both Rodina and Harris also contributed, such a rights-based approach to state-society relations is used as a way into re-interpreting urban resilience in the global South. Resilience is more likely to be achieved, they argue, if the rights of urban citizens become “the object to be made resilient”. Here they begin to point to ways in which rights-based struggles are implicated within the social contract.

Re-interpreting this social contract brings us back to one of the ongoing concerns of political ecology, its particular struggles with neo-Hobbesian and neo-Malthusian



approaches both of which view a particular role for the state in preserving or undermining individual freedoms in the context of pressure on resources. Bryant and Bailey (1996) therefore demonstrate how neo-Hobbesian arguments are able to flourish through neo-Malthusian fears of impending ecological disaster. They quote Ophuls (1977: 163):

“ecological scarcity in particular seems to engender overwhelming pressures toward political systems that are frankly authoritarian by current standards, for there seems to be no other way to check competitive overexploitation of resources and to assure competent direction of a complex society’s affairs in accord with steady-state imperatives. Leviathan may be mitigated, but not evaded”

The classic expression of this neo-Hobbesian argument can be seen in Garrett Hardin’s (1968) *Tragedy of the Commons*, an argument that political ecologists have forcefully dismissed through rich empirical research into the management of common property resources and through more theoretical critiques of the assumptions built into the claim. Ophuls (1973) choice of “Leviathan or oblivion” is thus shown to be an utterly false one. Nevertheless, subtle analyses of the present conjuncture show the need to take seriously the return of neo-Hobbesianism. Thus, more recently Wainwright and Mann (2018) have developed a conjunctural analysis of the possible political economic outcomes of climate change mitigation and adaptation on a global scale. Against more naïve arguments that appear to diminish capital’s responses to climate change, they detect a more insidious set of processes:

...we contend that the drive to defend capitalist social relations will push the world toward ‘Climate Leviathan,’ namely, adaptation projects to allow capitalist elites to stabilize their position amidst planetary crises. This scenario, we posit, implies a shift in the character and form of sovereignty: the likely emergence of *planetary sovereignty*, defined by an exception proclaimed in the name of preserving life on Earth.

Rather than a singular Leviathan, they foresee a range of forces seeking to enact the role of planetary sovereign. Against such forces – and against authoritarian populist alternatives – they advocate for *Climate X*, the yet-to-be-defined possible futures struggled for by a range of social movements pushing for climate justice.

While the form of social contract likely to be realised by *Climate Leviathan* in the shape of planetary sovereignty is problematized by Wainwright and Mann (*ibid.*), for others social contracts represent potential avenues through which social and ecological justice might be pursued in the wake of catastrophic climatic events. Again, this is not a simplistic choice between Leviathan or oblivion but rather a suggestion for rethinking the social contract on the grounds of environmental governance. Thus, for Blackburn and Pelling (forthcoming) “social contracts offer a rich lens for research on the politics and fairness of adaptation and its consequences”. While using the plural – “social contracts” – the authors adhere to Campbell’s definition of the social contract “as recognition of the legitimising force of citizen consent to the authorities which limit their freedoms, and the reciprocal duty of social institutions to uphold the equal rights of all”.

## From Political Geography meeting Political Ecology to Geopolitical Ecology

As this review demonstrates, political ecological approaches to the state are flourishing and conversations with political geography are many. Thus, *Political Geography* revised its Aims and Scope in 2016 in order to open the journal to work in “post-human politics” and “political ecology” (Benjaminsen et al 2017). Soon after, the journal published a special feature on “Political Ecologies of the State”, prefaced with an editorial by Leila Harris, which serves as another clear summary of the potential sources of dialogue and the potential benefits from a deepened conversation. The special feature contains pieces from Clarke-Sather (2017) on Foucault’s aleatory power, Theriault (2017) on the more-than-human, and Kelly-Richards and Bannister (2017) who demonstrate that “‘the state’ is an emergent effect of the processes of inclusion and exclusion” and how, furthermore, this state effect is destabilised by material infrastructures and physical geography.

A further iteration of the emerging dialogue appears in Bigger and Neimark’s call for an “explicit encounter” between critical geopolitics and political ecology (Bigger and Neimark 2017). Noting the long-established synergies between the two subdisciplines, the authors point to the work of Sundberg (2011), Mitchell (2013), Chatuverdi and Doyle (2015), Dalby (2014) and Moore (2015). Of these, Dalby’s work on environmental geopolitics is perhaps the best-known encounter; recently O’Lear’s (2017) *Environmental Geopolitics* provides another addition. At times, these calls for a dialogue with critical geopolitics crossover with readings of the Anthropocene. Thus, Dalby (2016: 34) in his review of Anthropocene discourses, citing a paper co-authored with Brauch and Oswald Spring (Brauch et al 2011) in writing that “Political economy is now too a matter of political ecology, or at the planetary scale perhaps now a matter better understood in terms of political geoecology”. Elsewhere, and building on Bigger and Neimark’s (2017) call, a series of sessions at the 2018 AAG was framed explicitly around Geopolitical Ecologies<sup>2</sup>. And a conference organised at the University of Oxford in 2019 seeks to develop a forum on Conservation Geopolitics.

Given the genuine excitement around such dialogues it seems somewhat heretical to question the potential benefits for political ecology. Nevertheless, I find myself unconvinced that either critical geopolitics or the Anthropocene concept is really able to deal with the thorny questions of how power relations manifest among socially differentiated (classed, raced, sexed and gendered) individuals. Given that I advocated in my previous report (Loftus 2017) for an approach to political ecology shaped by a form of relational comparison, any approach to geopolitical ecologies, in my view, would need to cut through geopolitical abstractions in order to better understand the many different determinations shaping lived realities. Moving from popular to formal geopolitics requires

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<sup>2</sup> Organised by Clare Beer and Sara Hughes, the sessions further confirmed the appetite for a dialogue. Beer’s own MA research, in which she seeks to develop an understanding of environmental statecraft through conceptualising the relation between state, territory and nature (in part drawing on the Strategic Relational Approach referred to earlier) further deepens the sense that these dialogues are likely to be fruitful.

patient attention to the mediations, the conceptions of the world that animate the theory and practice of everyday life. Exploring these mediations has been one of the characteristic features of political ecological research and seems absolutely critical in the present moment as differing groups struggle to make sense of global environmental change within historically and geographically specific conditions. While embracing intra-disciplinary dialogue – something that I hope this review has shown to be unavoidable – it seems necessary to also retain what is so valuable to political ecology. In approaching its different states, therefore, political ecological research has consistently shown that beneath the apparent abstraction lies sets of socio-ecological relations, struggles and injustices. Better understanding these relations, struggles and injustices requires careful and patient work and not a rush to abstract.

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